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Baker's Dozen Tips for Social Skills Instruction for Students with Asperger Syndrome

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Asperger Syndrome (AS) is considered part of the spectrum of autism disorders. It is characterized by qualitative impairment in social interaction manifested by failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level, impairment in the use of nonverbal behaviors, lack of social reciprocity, and restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior (DSM-IV-TR, 2000). Despite the view of AS as a milder form of autism and its placement on the higher end of the spectrum it is viewed

as highly disabling social condition and is a most significant disability in adolescence and young adulthood when social relationships are central to achievement. (Tantum, 1991). Incidence of AS statistics vary from 1/250 to 1/500 (Asperger Syndrome Coalition of the United States, but as awareness increases, many educators and families are seeking to provide appropriate educational services to meet these students' social needs. The following is a compilation of research-based social skills instruction strategies offered to assist educators working with students with Asperger Syndrome.

What follows are suggested strategies for supporting students with AS in general education settings.

1. **Carol Gray Social Stories:** Social stories (Gray, 1994b) are short stories that provide the student with AS important information regarding specific social situations or events. Social stories provide the "who, what, when, where, and why" of social situations. They are not directive, but rather, provide important information so the student is fully informed to choose a behavioral response. Social stories are personalized for each child. They are designed to bring predictability to a situation that as student with AS might find difficult to understand (Gray, 1998). An advantage to using social stories is they allow the student to revisit and prepare for a social event time and time again.

2. **Comic Strip Conversations:** Comic strip conversations (Gray, 1994a) are a shorter, more succinct means to provide support to students with AS information as they encounter various social situations and events. Through the use of simple drawings and thought bubbles, comic strip conversations visually illustrate the actions, feelings, thoughts and intentions of those involved in a particular social situation. Colors can be used to display and highlight feelings as well. Advantages to comic strip conversations are that they are age-appropriate pleasant presentation, size, and portable.

3. **Power cards:** Power cards are visual aids that incorporate a student's special interest(s) to teach appropriate social interactions. The Power card strategy consists of presenting how the student's "hero" or special interest solves a problem on a card with a suggestion of how the student might use that same strategy to solve a problem for themselves (Gagnon, 2001). The advantage to using power cards is they draw upon the students area of high interest or passion, and are therefore highly motivating to many students with AS.

4. **Social Scripts:** Social scripts are examples of communication that can expand language use for students with satisfactory language skills (McClannahan and Krantz, 1999) Providing students with one to three statements on a social script card after several role-plays equips the student for naturally occurring practice opportunities. An advantage to using social scripts is that they provide a visual self-prompt for the student with AS to begin and maintain a positive social interaction.

5. **Incidental Teaching:** Incidental teaching is teaching social skills in the natural setting as they occur. Richard Lavoie (Bieber, 1994) coined the phrase "social autopsy" as a means of assisting students with learning disabilities to understand and learn from social mistakes. This strategy is particularly effective with students with AS as it allows them to dissect what happened and see the cause and effect relationship between their behavior and the

reaction of others. In a nonpunitive manner, the mistake is analyzed, and that information becomes the basis for developing a plan for change. Social autopsies can also be used to analyze and learn from successful interactions. An advantage to using incidental teaching and social autopsies is they are highly relevant to the student, and they provide immediate feedback and opportunity for practice and reinforcement.

6. **Hidden Curriculum Instruction:** The hidden curriculum refers to the unwritten or unspoken rules that are a part of the school environment that everyone except the student with AS knows (Bieber, 1994). Students with AS are most often unaware of these rules, and violate them repeatedly, for they do not intuitively discern where the correct place to stand is in the morning, safe and unsafe places, or what is socially acceptable or not. An advantage to providing direct instruction on the hidden curriculum is that is provides critical information important to social success in school to the student with AS.

7. **Mind-reading:** Mind-reading is the teaching of emotional states of others. Interventions that focus on "theory of mind," or mind-reading teach students with AS to infer other people's thoughts, beliefs, desires and intentions, and then use this information to make interpretations (Howlin et.al, 1999). Curriculum teaches emotional states and information through the use of photographs, pictures, and schematic drawings. An advantage to teaching mind-reading to students with AS is that it improves social understanding, rather than specific behaviors for specific situations.

8. **Social Skills Training Groups:** Creating groups specifically for the purpose of social skills instruction can be an effective means of supporting students with AS. The persistent challenge to social skills training groups is the generalization of skills taught to the natural settings in which they occur (Gresham et. al., 2001). However, an advantage to using social skills training groups is they in the development of social skills for they provide an opportunity and safe environment for modeling, coaching, feedback and reinforcement of social skills for the student with AS.

9. **Peer mentors:** Trained peer partners can be effective in initiating and prompting social skills a student with AS is learning. Helpful suggestions for the selection of peer mentors are that they are classmates of the student with AS, they demonstrate age-appropriate social skills themselves, and they have a positive history of interactions with the student with ASD (Odom and McConnell, 1993). The advantage of using peer mentors is that it allows the teacher and other adults to act as a facilitator, rather than simulating a peer.

10. **Clubs:** Clubs afford the student with AS a socially appropriate opportunity to pursue and share his/her passion with others who share the same interest. Rotating group membership is suggested when possible. The advantage to clubs is that they provide the student with on-going social opportunities around a high their own high area of interest.

11. **Video Modeling:** Video modeling allows students with AS to watch both good and bad examples of behaviors that occur in various social settings so that they can make informed choices about their own behavior. Video modeling allows the same

positive presentation of social skills to be viewed over and over again so that it can become scripted into a student's skill repertoire. Video modeling also allows the option of pausing, freezing, or repeating a scene so that students can practice component skills of a social exchange or event. An advantage to using video modeling is that it is visual and is often a high interest activity for students with AS.

12. **Video review:** Video review is another means to offer instruction to students with AS who are typically highly visual learners. Video review consists of taping a student with AS involved in a particular social situation, and then reviewing it with the student. It is important to note that video review should only be used as a positive means of information sharing, and never as a means to mock or belittle a student. The behavior of everyone in the video should be analyzed, not just the student with AS, and a ratio of at least five positive comments to every correction should be maintained (Sturmey, P. 2003). An advantage of using video review is it is student specific, highly relevant, and allows the student the unique perspective of seeing self in social situations.

13. **Retreat/break areas:** Providing a safe place to which a student can retreat or take a break when upset is a simple, but often underutilized strategy. Once the student feels more secure and in control of self, re-entry to a social situation can occur. An advantage to providing retreat space is it affords the student with AS the opportunity to self-monitor, exercise self-control, and respond to their individual anxiety levels.

For further information on social skills training for students with AS, visit these websites:

- http://www.ccoder.com/gainingface: This site contains a downloadable program for learning about facial expressions and provides links to other sites

- http://www.jeaniemcafee.com: This website provides innovative materials and techniques, as well as updates on strategies that have been in use for some time.

- http://www.thegraycenter.org: This is Carol Gray's comprehensive website with social story guidelines and products to order.

- http://www.tongyattwood.com.au: This website is devoted to resources and information specific to Asperger Syndrome

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